

Interview H0084 : with Horkhang, Sonam Pembar [tib. hor khang bsod nams dpal 'bar] , (China, 1992) : Part No. 1 of 1

Horkhang was an aristocratic Tibetan government official. He discusses the establishment and work of the Reform (Legjö) Office in detail and a law case in which Sera monastery's miser on its Trapchi Estate wanted reforms. He also discusses the power divisions between three units: Chamdo, Tashilhunpo and Å#, and how aristocrats were selling estates to monasteries. He also talks about how Kapshöba bribed Taktra by giving him two estates.

Q

Tell me about the origin and development of the Reform Office (tib. Legjö [legs bcas las khungs]) and how it worked. I don't know whether it belonged to the Tibet Autonomous Region or not. We heard that as a result of the establishment of the Reform Office, the Drepung Jiso's [estates] were taken back by the monastery itself and it paid a salary to the Jiso.

A

That is right. Since it has been a long time, I don't remember clearly. The People's Liberation Army arrived in 1951 and probably the Reform Office was started at the end of 1953. It was a part of the Local [Tibetan] Government itself and it did not belong to the Preparatory Committee of the Tibet Autonomous Region.

Q

In the beginning, how did they make the decision to set up the Reform Office?

A

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The reason for establishing it was that in the 17-Point Agreement it was written that the Tibetan Government should gradually change its system by reforms. In the past, the system in Tibet was a serf-type feudal system. So when the leaders of the Tibetan Government and the people are in agreement to have reforms in the society, they will implement the reform system. Since we couldn't remain as before, in order to show a kind of direction to make changes from the early time, the Reform Office was established to do this very gradually.

In the past, there was the Tsondu hragdu gyepa assembly. The heads of this assembly meeting were the 8 Trungtsi. In the past, there used to be 6 Trungtsi, but at some point it became 8 or 7 when they appointed extra ones. Normally, there were 6 Trungtsi. These were the heads of the assembly. The regular leaders who met were the 3 Trunyichemmo and 3 Tspön. Beneath them, there were the representatives from each of the government official's ranks such as rimshi, dzasa, theiji, tseja and laja, senampa, ordinary monk and lay officials, etc. From each of these, 2 representatives attended the Tsondu to discuss starting the Reform Office. Sera, Drepung and Ganden monasteries also had 2 delegates from each monastery.

The work it did, as you said, was to have the Drepung Jiso [property] managed by the monastery itself in order to lessen the taxes of the miser and to take back estates that had been leased. Also if there was a need to collect new taxes or income, it should not come from the miser but the government should take other measures to get the income. And all the dzong's estates were to be managed by the government. In the past, the lay officials normally had a picnic called Trungji Yarkyi [tib. drung spyi dbyar skyid] and the monk officials had a picnic called Tsidrung Yarkyi [tib. rtse drung dbyar skyid]. Also the Kashag had a party called Kashag Thogtro [tib. bka' shag thugs spro] and the Tseja Office had a picnic called Tseja Trochen [tib. rtse phyag spro chen] while the Laja had a party called the Laja Trochen [tib. bla phyag spro chen]. In the past, these parties and picnics used to be two given by turns by two officials. These 2 officials had to provide all the expenditures. However, the Reform Office made a change decreeing that the expenses should be paid by common funds. At that time, the Reform Office was showing the direction that everything should be done by the common [entity as a whole]. At that time, I was one of the senampa, the junior fourth rank, officials. I was one of the delegates from the senampa. All total there were about 45-50 delegates who attended the meeting. Mostly 45-46 delegates.

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Q

When would you hold the meetings?

A

The meetings were held once or twice each week on a set day. The office also had some permanent secretaries who met every day.

Q

What was the order or sequence of the reforms that should be done. Probably, the Jiso reform might be one of the last ones. It was done in 1956-57, right?

A

Yes, the Jiso was done later on.

Q

What were the first, second and third things that were reformed?

A

One of the things that should be reformed was that aristocrats had estates to provide their income [no salaries] and some of the big aristocratic families had many estates and also many miser. In order to reform this, the main idea was to pay them a salary according to their jobs. In the past, they didn't have a salary and each lived off the income from their estates. The idea was ultimately to take back the estates gradually, but at first no one ever mentioned that. In the past, one lay official and one monk official or in some of the dzong, two lay officials or two monk officials. would manage the dzong and the dzong's estates. Some of the dzong had one lay official or just one monk official. Later it was changed so that there would be one monk and one lay official sent to all of the dzongs and estates.

Q

Was this for managing the dzong or the estates?

A

Yes. Normally the dzong were the bigger ones and the estates were the smaller ones.

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Q

Have you heard about a case where Sera monastery's misers on an estate in Trapchi [tib. grwa bzhi] asked for reforms right then but Sera monastery asked for a delay of the reforms? Can you tell us about this?

A

I don't recall that incident.

Q

Around 1955, 1956, 1957, Sera and Drepung asked for land reforms to be postponed, right?

A

This was later. When the Reform Office was set up in 1953, there was no talk about delaying the reforms. In the years 1955-56, then there was talk about delaying the reforms. [Another Person:] At that time, the miser of Trapchi told the Sera Monastery's Jiso that they wouldn't work for the taxes any more and that they wanted the reforms. The Jiso reported this to the Laji and the Laji submitted a petition to the Local (Tibetan) Government and the Reform Office saying that the miser were acting like this, but we don't want the reforms because the estates would get destroyed. At the same time, the Sera Laji also sent a letter to the Drepung Laji saying that we should make a joint complaint. Consequently, the Drepung Laji submitted a petition to the government saying that if you implement the reforms, the [system of] monastic estates will get finished. I am not sure whether this is true or not?

Q

I met a Drepung Jiso and he remembered about this a little bit.

A

Probably this must be true, but I don't remember it clearly.

Q

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I also heard that the Reform Office didn't work out well because they had some problems, right?

A

Yes, there were a lot of obstructions and arguments. Even though the lay officials had their estates and among them some were of the highest status, the depön midra [tib. sde dpon mi drag], and although the monk officials didn't have estates, the aristocrats were more in favor of change than the monk officials and they were talking more strongly. Actually, the aristocrats should have had attachments to their estates and should have talked stronger, but there weren't many people talking. From among the monk officials, some of them said that we cannot implement the so called reforms and the delegates from Sendregasum also said the same because the monasteries' had monastic estates.

Q

Were there delegates from Sendregasum at the meeting?

A

Yes, there were. But the abbots didn't come. They only came for the largest national assembly meeting [tib. hrag bsdus rgyas shos]. The main head of the Reform Office was Ngabö. Normally, there was no custom for a shape to come to the Tsondu, but for this one, Ngabö came and sat on a high cushion. Then there were the 8 Trungtsi.

Q

At that time were they talking about taking back estates?

A

At that time they were starting to talk about that, but it was said that we don't need to do that right away. After becoming aware that the system of one human being exploiting another human being is not good, we should do reforms gradually and we should also educate the miser. The first step was to have the government itself manage the dzong and the dzong's estates. A plan was made which stated how much salary each aristocrat would get based on his rank and a document regarding their salaries was also made, and it was decided that they would not keep their estates. However, in actuality they were unable to

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implement this. At first they planned to implement it, but then there was opposition talk from everywhere.

Q

I heard that Tashilhunpo wanted reforms quickly. Did they send you letters about this?

A

That's right. They asked for quick reforms, but according to my recollection, they didn't send us any letters .

Q

Did Tashilhunpo had its own separate power, right?

A

Yes. The properties of Tashilhunpo itself were kind of separate and they had the power over these.

Q

Wasn't there the Shigatse Jidzong [tib. spyi rdzong] [the governor of the Shigatse area]?

A

Yes, but Tashilhunpo was a different labrang and they had power over their own subjects, but not over the subjects of the Shigatse Jidzong.

Q

They didn't have the power over the miser living on the estates that belonged to the government, right?

A

Yes. But later when the People's Liberation Army came, they became more famous. Normally, there were the two Jidzong heads. One was a rimshi and one a khenjung. They were in charge of the government's estates and Tashilhunpo looked after its own estates and miser. In the old society, whatever the Jidzong said, Tashilhunpo had to obey. But Tashilhunpo was kind of different and there were also aristocrats appointed

by the Tashilhunpo government such as Kyabing [tib. skyabs dbyings] dzasa and also many other positions like khenjung and tsendrön, etc. Since the Jidzong was of the fourth rank and the dzasa was the third rank, before the Panchen Lama returned, they were exercising their power as equal. After the Panchen Lama came back, there were 2 dzasa [in the Tashilhunpo government], Jejigme [tib. ce 'jigs med] and Lhamön Yeshe Tshütrim [tib. lha smon ye shes tshul khri] and all the Tibetan Government officials were recalled. So their government became kind of almost independent after 1951. But this was only over their own miser, not over all the miser in the Tsang region.

Q

Chamdo was also kind of separate, right?

A

Yes. There were three units: domey [Kham], tashilhunpo and ü [central Tibet].

Q

Then the power of the local government became kind of less, right?

A

Yes. Especially in Chamdo which underwent a military liberation so a Liberation Committee [tib. bcings 'grol u yon lhan khang] was set up there so the Tibetan Government did not interfere much there.

Q

Did the Reform Office have relations with the Preparatory Committee.

A

Not much. Sometimes a little bit through Ngabö who would bring a letter from them asking us something. And sometimes on some issues we would ask them for advice on how to settle some issue that the Reform Office couldn't decide on.

Q

We heard that in the 1950s, Kapshöba sold 2 estates to the Drepung Jiso. Was it permitted to sell an estate?

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A

In the old society it was not at all permitted. But later, the system became bad, so people did it. Some say that Kapshöba gave Taktra several estates when he asked for promotion to the office of shape. It was not only talk and later Taktra took possession of the estates called Serjog [tib. gser lcog] and Phuntse [tib. phun rtse] in Gyantse. Probably, he gave them to Taktra.

Q

It seemed strange. They [the monasteries] didn't understand the situation too well, they were buying estates in 1957. By that time there was the danger that the feudal system would be ended, but the monasteries were buying them [estates], right?.

A

You are right. They didn't really understand. In fact, there were a number of cases where some aristocrats gave their estates to the monastery so that it couldn't as easily be taken away as from a private family since there were so many monks, etc.

Q

I heard that the People's Association also had some relations with the monasteries. Did the Reform Office have relations with the People's Association?

A

There wasn't any way for it to have official relations with the Reform Office. In case we had relations, by that time the Preparatory Committee of the Tibet Autonomous Region was also set up. Before that, there was the Military Headquarter of the People's Liberation Army [ch. si lung bu], so if they inquired about this, it would be difficult for us to answer. The leader of Reform Office was Ngabö, so there was no way of the Reform Office getting together with the People's Association and they didn't have any relations with us. But among the delegates, there were the delegates from Sendregasum and the different government ranks. Some of these people expressed the ideas of the People's Association in our meetings on behalf of the People's Association. But then others said, "If we listen to these things and if the Military Headquarters learned of it and if they asked us "Were you people also involved in this?" there would be a lot of trouble. So we should not get

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mixed up with this stuffs." There were many comments like this, and the Reform Office was saying that we should tell them that you are not allowed to do that. If you bring their matters to this meeting, there would be a lot of trouble. Like this, we, the Reform Office didn't yield to them. Otherwise, the People's Association actually sent a letter to the Reform Office saying this is what should be done. If you don't do like this, then Tibet's political system can't survive.

Q

What did they say you should do in that letter?

A

It was similar to what the officials of Sendregasum said. It talked a lot about the reforms.

Q

Was this in 1951-52?

A

Probably, it was in 1953 when the Reform Office was set up.

Q

What was the purpose of the Preparatory Committee? Was it for the Tibetan government to get converted into the Tibet Autonomous Region?

A

Yes. Gradually it was to do that. In the beginning, they set up the Preparatory Committee. It was said that on the day when the Tibet Autonomous Region was set up, the Tibetan Government would no longer exist and Tibet Autonomous Region would be substituted for the Local (Tibetan) Government. At that time, the three units; Domey (Chamdo), Tsang (Tashilhunpo) and ü (the Tibetan Government) would be all be joined under Tibet Autonomous Region. That's why all the educated and famous people from all the three units where involved when they set up the Preparatory Committee.

Q

Didn't people protest this?

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A

No. When they set up the Preparatory Committee, there was no opposition.

Q

Was the reason for not protesting that they thought the Tibetans would have the power as before?

A

There wasn't any power in reality, but they just set up the Preparatory Committee and all the people from three units got together and all the departments were set up like culture and agriculture, animal husbandry, and so on.

Q

In the 17-Point Agreement, it was written that the Tibetan Government will remain kind of as before.

A

It was said temporarily everything will remain as before, but when the people request reforms, then we had to do it.

Q

It is hard for me to understand because when the Preparatory Committee was set up, people should have said that we don't want this. We will do the reform by ourselves. But there wasn't such protest, right?

A

Yes, there wasn't protest.

Q

Internally, did the government officials talk about whether it [the Preparatory Committee] was good or bad?

A

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There wasn't much talk like this. The ones who came out openly and opposed the Preparatory Committee were Sendregasum. The kudrak didn't oppose it. Probably, not only from Trapchi, there might be such cases everywhere. There was an incident with the Youth League in Gyantse about a Phünkhang's estate whose shidü was called Pöngen Chogdrub [tib. dpon rgan mchog grub]. At that time, the Woman's Association [tib. bud med tshogs pa] and the Youth League [tib. gzhon nu tshogs pa] had been set up and a youngster belonging to that estate named Wangchen Phüntso [tib. dbang chen phun tshogs] joined the Youth League and then opposed the shidü. So the shidü seized him and had him whipped. The case finally came to the Preparatory Committee. The decision was that the miser was allowed to join the Youth League and the shidü was demoted and expelled from the estate. It was said that anyone could join the Youth League. This was in 1957 and the Preparatory Committee decided that the Youth League was allowed to be established.

Q

I never heard this.

A

There were many similar things happening everywhere, but I can't remember them one by one.